Transition of Graduates from Backpack-to-Briefcase: A Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper overviews the Backpack-to-Briefcase project which established a set of prototype career development learning strategies for Australian university Career Services, with the aim of contributing to their services for supporting students and graduates to make a smoother transition into graduate employment and the world-of-work.

Approach

A case study analysis of the development and implementation of three career development learning interventions is described. These interventions include: (a) employability skills workshops for students, (b) career mentoring for students, and (c) services to small and medium sized employers to support their recruitment and induction of new graduates into their worksites.

Findings

The prototype interventions developed in the project extended the work of the university's Career Service. The interventions were judged as having the capacity to be readily implemented by university Career Services. A key outcome was the success of the graduate-induction initiative which engaged small and medium sized employers traditionally unfamiliar with or unable to enter the graduate recruitment market.

Value

This case study highlights the value of university Career Services' contributions to undergraduate preparation for the world-of-work, particularly in regional areas. Furthermore, the case study highlights the importance of inter-departmental cooperation within the university environment, and the value of university-industry collaboration toward the goal of improving graduates' transitions into the workforce, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Transition of Graduates from Backpack to Briefcase: A Case Study

The notion of graduate employability is increasingly relevant to lifelong learning (McKenzie & Wurzburg, 1997) and higher education (Yorke, 2006). Australian industry demands university graduates who can readily transit into the workforce and effectively demonstrate their employability skills (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia, 2002). In addition, Government commissioned reports (e.g., Precision Consultancy, 2007), a Ministerial position paper (Nelson, 2002), and a statement from the peak body Universities Australia (2008), all highlight the importance of preparing university students for the workplace. University Career Services can play an important role in developing graduate employability (Watts, 2006). By way of a case study of the *Backpack-to-Briefcase Project*, we present one example of how an Australian university Career Service is addressing the employability of graduates. The prototype services developed by the project lend practice-based evidence to the assertion that university Career Services can contribute to the educational goal of graduate employability, particularly for rural and regional graduates.

Career Services within Australian Higher Education

Each Australian university has a Career Service for its students; however, the size of the organisational units and the services they provide may vary considerably from institution to institution. The majority are organisationally independent of academic departments. Notwithstanding institutional variation, a typical Career Service provides employment services, career education, and career counselling free of charge to its students (for a comprehensive review see Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2008).

Career Services have developed industry-specific initiatives, such as: providing career education to engineering students to consolidate their career understanding, commitment to study, and learning how to demonstrate their employability skills in the workplace (McIlveen & Gibson, 2000; Palmer & Bray, 2002) and in e-portfolios (McCowan, Harper, & Hauville, 2005). In reflecting a dimension of social justice in their practices (e.g., McIlveen, Everton, & Clarke, 2005), Career Services have also attended to the needs of students who experience difficulties in the transition to the workforce: for example, students with a disability (McIlveen, Cameron, McLachlan, & Gunn, 2005); international students unfamiliar with cultural nuances (Smith, Grainger, Lacey, & Bassett, 2007); and arts and humanities students whose disciplines lack a definitive professional skill set (Lewis & Ruchel, 1993; Waugh, 1993). A notable exception to the breadth of services reported in the Australian literature, are examples of practice specifically targeting small and medium sized enterprises or rural and regional employers—a finding which highlights the relevance of the current project.

The Backpack-to-Briefcase Project

Beyond Education

The career development learning concept *Beyond Education* was conceived of as a developmental map for lifelong learning and lifelong employability. Beyond Education forms the basis of the Backpack-to-Briefcase Project. Beyond Education features modular stages that pertain to an individual's transition through major developmental milestones of career (Reynolds, 2004). It must be emphasised that Beyond Education is not a formal psychological theory of career development. Rather, in a pragmatic sense, it represents a lifelong developmental approach, such as the lifespan/lifespace theory (Super, 1992), and the relationship between lifelong career development and employability (Watts, 2006). The

developmental stages are labelled: *Backpack-to-Briefcase*; *Economy-to-Business*; *Functional-to-Holistic*; *Corporate-to-Portfolio*; and *Beyond-60-with-Value-to-Add*.

Backpack-to-Briefcase is the first stage of the Beyond Education model and represents the beginning of a graduate's working life, whereby the technical and personal skills obtained from a university education are complemented by the generic skills required by the employer, such that the graduate possesses a suite of skills allowing a smooth and rapid transition into a productive employee from the employer's perspective. The initial impressions of not only the graduate, but also the employers toward whom they transit, will necessarily have a fundamental influence on subsequent career and educational aspirations. Further, it is crucial that the technical and personal skills that the graduate possesses allow a smooth and rapid transition into a productive employee from the employer's perspective. Backpack-to-Briefcase is the specific focus of this case study.

The Economy-to-Business stage represents the phase during which new professionals finally become confident in their professional status, but may now require a differing set of skills to continue to progress in their work environment, either due to a change in direction by the employees themselves, or due to a change of the skill base required by the employer. The Functional-to-Holistic stage represents the advanced professional, whereby the employee's skill base is "rounded out" so that the employee can continue progressing in his or her chosen field. In the Corporate-to-Portfolio stage, advanced professionals are able to confidently divide their mind and resources into multiple projects and responsibilities, whereby the skills base is further refined in order to clearly identify the employee's transferable "portfolio" and identification as to the method/s which best allows the effective "transfer" of that portfolio to changing job and educational needs. The Beyond 60-with-Value-to-Add stage represents the phase of withdrawal from the world-of-work, but emphasises that by a re-skilling or refocusing, senior corporate citizens can still have much to offer that is both meaningful and productive.

Project Mandate

With special funding from the Australian Government's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 2005, the Beyond Education project team was commissioned to establish a set of pragmatic solutions to the problem of students' learning the employability skills necessary for their effective transition into the workforce as graduates. The project team was ultimately required to develop and describe prototype examples of practice that could be used as learning stimuli by other universities and readily adapted and implemented by their Career Services.

Project Team and Steering Committee

The primary project team consisted of staff within the University of Southern Queensland's Career Service and the Faculty of Business. The University of Southern Queensland is a multi-campus institution: with sites at its main campus of Toowoomba, a major inland rural regional city heavily populated with small-to-medium sized enterprises; Hervey Bay, a coastal regional city; and Springfield, a new suburban development on the boundary of Brisbane, the State's metropolitan capital city, typically replete with major graduate employment opportunities. Approximately 75% of the university's student population study by distance education mode. Notwithstanding the importance of the needs of the distance education students, the Backpack-to-Briefcase project had on-campus, first-degree students as its focus. This particular demographic group was the main source of attention for Australian employers' interest in employability skills, and the university's attention with respect to graduates seeking employment in a rural and regional area.

The project team reported to and was guided by a Steering Committee comprised of a senior corporate executive, a senior public servant, and university representatives, who took a professional interest in graduates' transitions to employment. The committee observed whether the project aligned with the Government's funding contract and provided general advice.

Employer Reference Groups

Two employer reference groups were established to: (a) ground the project's relevance within the world-of-work, (b) seek employers' feedback on graduates' transition into the workforce, (c) generate ideas for interventions in collaboration with employers, and (d) provide critical feedback and appraisal of the project's outcomes in terms of the potential for employer uptake. One group was based in Toowoomba and the other in Brisbane. Representatives on the reference groups included small and medium sized enterprise owners and managers, educational professionals, State and municipal government officials, community not-for-profit organisations, managers and partners of large corporations across various industry sectors (e.g., accounting, human resources management, marketing, engineering, legal, and energy). The groups met twice over the life of the project: firstly prior to developing the interventions, and secondly mid-way through the project during the implementation and testing of interventions. In consultation with the employer reference group, the project team successfully developed and implemented three programme elements.

Programme Elements

Employability Skills Workshops

This scheme has been delivered via workshops for students at two regional campus sites of the university. These workshops involved presentations by employers from a range of private and government organisations. The Employability Skills Workshops were designed to demonstrate to students the importance of the generic skills in the workplace (e.g., communication, teamwork, technology, problem solving, self-management, planning, and learning), and how to develop them in order to be better prepared for employment.

Students were provided with a comprehensive workbook, through which they would progress, in conjunction with workshop content. The workbook was designed as a learning tool that allowed the students to understand the information from a world-of-work perspective and relate it back to their own abilities and experiences, and studies while at university. The workbook contained specific exercises pertaining to the development of employability skills. Like the other learning materials developed for the project, this resource has been made available to other universities for their use and adaptation.

A significant feature of the workshops was their delivery by employer representatives and private consultants in collaboration with university career development professionals. These industry trainers provided their time and expertise free-of-charge, as they were committed to the aim of better preparing graduates for the workforce and had no commercial interest by participating. Delivery by industry professionals enabled students to have direct contact with the world-of-work and to hear what was expected in the contemporary graduate workplace.

Many Australian university students must manage part-time employment while studying, and this time commitment can diminish their capacity to attend on-campus presentations (Long & Hayden, 2001). Thus, an important challenge was establishing the preferred timing of the workshops: either in a full-day format, or a series of linked workshops scheduled over the academic semester. Given the complexities of their study schedules and

part-time employment, students indicated a preference for a series of workshops rather than a single, full-day format.

This approach to career development learning has subsequently been taken up by the university's Faculty of Business and forms part of an elective course in work-integrated learning. In this way, the career development learning content of the workshop is used to prepare students for their industry placements. This preparatory material complements discipline-specific material pertaining to students completing a project as part of their course learning and assessment requirements. In addition to the industry project's assessment requirements, students reflect upon their career development learning in relation to their industry experience and development of their employability skills. The University of Southern Queensland is a major provider of distance education; accordingly, the workshops have been professionally recorded in digital format for online teaching. Consequently, the Employability Skills Workshop can now be offered to a range of university students who are studying by distance education or who are unable to attend the on-campus workshops, and can be used by academics of other disciplines who may choose to use the workshops to supplement their own teaching content.

Career Mentoring Network

The career mentoring scheme linked employers and students to develop students' understanding of the employability skills required for success in the workplace and to establish networks that may assist their career development. The scheme differed from similar mentorship programmes offered through Australian universities (e.g., Theobald, Nancarrow, & McCowan, 1999) through its emphasis upon development and the skills identified in the Employability Skills for the Future framework.

The mentoring scheme was deliberately constrained in size (i.e., the number of mentoring pairs) so as to maintain control over the experience and the management of bringing a pair together. The scheme was publicly promoted to students and employers, and both were invited to apply. Their applications entailed describing their goals for a mentoring relationship, and their career interests. Pairs were "matched" by the Career Service staff. Students were encouraged to view the relationship in a formal sense, taking personal responsibility, and treating the relationship with the same respect as if they were an employee. The duration of mentoring arrangements was trialled, as either one academic semester (approximately three months) or a full academic year of two semesters. Each round was launched by an official reception at which students and mentors were able to meet.

In order to support students' reflective learning, a comprehensive Mentoring Journal was developed for the mentors and students. The journal entailed a process of mentors and students contracting learning objectives and responsibilities, and contained a diary to record meetings and conversations between the parties. Moreover, the journal contained a description of the learning objectives and the employability skills, and a matrix into which students would write their comments in relation to what they had learned or had to learn in order to better transit into the world-of-work. The reflective journal has been a distinctive feature of this mentoring programme, which brought a strong learning orientation to the relationship. Whilst the manual brought contract and clarity to the relationship, it was emphasised that the relationship was to be kept flexible according to the needs of the pair. This measure of flexibility was appreciated by employers, whose feedback on the scheme raised the importance of allowing mentoring to suit their work schedules.

The mentoring scheme has subsequently been used by university academic departments as a prototype for learning materials emphasising the development and recording of experiences pertaining to employability skills (e.g., industry placement contracts, work-integrated learning contracts, student award schemes). For example, the journal which

supports the mentoring scheme has been used as a template for curriculum documentation for a work-integrated learning course offered by the Faculty of Business. Furthermore, the journal has been used to inform development of documentation for a student award scheme offered by the student union of the University of Southern Queensland. This award scheme requires students to participate in extra-curricula activities that contribute to the development of their employability skills. The mentoring scheme, and its journal's focus upon establishing clear learning goals and reflective learning pertaining to employability skills, was the most important and attractive aspect for its uptake by the academic department and the student union.

Graduate Induction Support

Whilst focussed upon student learning, the Backpack-to-Briefcase project also aimed to enhance small and medium sized enterprises' uptake of graduates according to their specific employability skills needs (e.g., McLeish, 2002). It aimed to assist small and medium-sized businesses to recruit, induct and retain graduates by providing the organisation with support and advice on developing a structured induction programme. This initiative was stimulated by employer input arising from the regional employer reference group, which was largely comprised of small and medium sized enterprises unfamiliar with the graduate recruitment market. Smaller, rural and regional organisations may not have the resources to develop the graduate-specific induction programmes of their larger corporate counterparts. As a consequence, graduates employed by small and medium sized enterprises sometimes lack the support and assistance provided by large organisations due to time and resource constraints. Through research into and modelling on existing graduate programmes deployed by corporations, this arm of the project enabled transfer of relevant knowledge to small and medium sized enterprises. Case studies were trialled and focused on different aspects of the graduate employment. Two case examples are presented here.

The first case entailed working with a regional accountancy firm which specialised in services for small business. This organisation aimed to develop a graduate employment programme that would effectively compete with recruitment programmes operated by other organisations, particularly those attracting regional graduates to large metropolitan companies. The consultations with the organisation entailed an assessment of their current human resources strategies for recruiting graduate staff. This was followed by the provision of tailored information on contemporary graduate recruitment practices and industry trends that impact upon a graduate's attraction to prospective employers (e.g., salary rates, continuing professional development, mentoring, flexible working conditions preferred by new graduates). A graduate recruitment strategy was developed in partnership with the organisation. The strategy included recommendations on the use of university Career Service promotional methods (e.g., Career Fair, online job advertisements), vacation and industry experience programmes to "pre-recruit", implementation of a support structure for new graduate staff, and application of a rotation system within the company. This partnership has continued since its inception and the organisation uses the university Careers Service as a preferred source of advice on securing graduate staff and promoting employment opportunities.

Another case focussed upon the recruitment needs of a local small business that specialised in the provision of consultation services to regional small businesses in relation to information technology systems. Like other regional companies, this organisation experienced considerable difficulty in recruiting information technology (IT) graduates, due to a small pool of available graduates (which resulted from a down turn in the IT market in previous years) and the level of competition from larger metropolitan IT firms. The consultation process entailed working closely with the academic head of an IT department

within a Faculty and the owner of the business, and facilitating discussion of their shared requirements (i.e., the academic needed industry placements for his students, the employer needed staff). In collaboration with the parties, the Career Service designed an industry experience programme which enabled students to undertake a specific IT project with the company, whilst simultaneously using this experience to fulfil the work-integrated learning requirements of their degrees. A specific industry experience manual, containing policies and procedures (e.g., summary of legislative matters pertaining to workplace conditions), learning outcomes (e.g., project specifications), and a reflective journal (e.g., self-assessment of employability skills developed during the industry placement), was provided to the students for their study requirements.

Appraisal

For the purpose of reporting on this case study of Backpack-to-Briefcase, Athanasou's (2007) model for evaluating career education and guidance has been used to inform the authors' critical appraisal of the programme. This model entails consideration of Ethics, Coverage, Costs, Objectives, Effects, and Stakeholders (ECCOES): Is the programme ethical? To what extent does the programme cover those who are most in need? What are the costs, benefits and utilities of the programme? Does the programme achieve its key objective? What is the net effect of the programme? To what extent have the perspectives or interests of all stakeholders been considered and met? Definitive studies into the cost-benefit and effectiveness of the programme cannot be presented in the present paper; however, we make tentative claims with regards to those dimensions.

Ethical Issues

There are no significant ethical issues associated with the programme. Nevertheless, involving employers in the programme requires prudent management with respect to their access to students as potential employees. Whilst employers have given their time freely and generously to the interventions, we have carefully stipulated that our allegiance must firstly be with the students—employers have supported our position.

Coverage

The Employability Skills Workshops are offered on campus and online through live streaming and downloadable materials. Likewise, the Career Mentoring Network is accessible by both on-campus and distance students through online communication platforms (e.g., email, wiki). For example, we have supported mentorship pairs with students in Australia and mentors in Indonesia and Japan. A key problem with the mentoring scheme is the sheer amount of labour required to conduct the matching process and process the mentoring agreements. This places limitations upon the number of students who can gain access to the service. Results of the graduate induction scheme indicated that small and medium sized enterprises could benefit from the support of university Career Services, and, moreover, that new graduates in those workplaces appreciated the contact with the university as they progressively developed more worksite independence. Within the Australian context, this type of direct support from university Career Cervices is not widespread. By establishing a university Career Service outreach programme, this induction scheme represents a radical shift in service delivery aimed at invigorating the involvement of smaller organisations in graduate recruitment.

Costs and Benefits

We have demonstrated that employers will engage with a university without imposing consultation fees. Whilst this is a core strength of the programme, it is conversely a potential core weakness, should employers choose not to participate. It is for this reason that we emphasise a collaborative approach to community engagement. The mentoring scheme presents the most significant challenge to resources because of the intensive processing required for matching mentor and student. We could, of course, recommend limitations on that process for the sake of saving labour; but we would not do so, because the quality of the experience for both parties would be put at risk of being diminished.

Objectives

The project has achieved its objective of developing prototype services. The acceptance of the report to the Australian Government attests to that achievement. That alone is not enough however; our presentations to institutional stakeholders have been a better measure of meeting our objective to share practices.

Effects

Having now established pilot versions of the career development learning interventions that can readily be taken up by other universities and employers, the future focus of the project must move to longitudinal research into evaluating its efficacy and effectiveness (cf. Athanasou, 2007). Whilst students ostensibly benefited from the pilot interventions of this project, there remains a need to research students' experiences with respect to their appraisal of the process and outcomes of the interventions. For example, research studies may investigate the intervention's immediate and long-term impact upon students' career aspirations, satisfaction with academic studies, or their experience of transition into graduate work.

Stakeholders

Students' feedback solicited at the close of the Employability Skills Workshops suggested their favouring industry representatives as presenters as they were seen to provide a complementary perspective on career development learning and its relation to the world-of-work. To fulfil the project's requirements with respect to employers' appraisals, the three prototype interventions were presented to the employer reference groups specifically to determine their views on the likelihood of employers collaboratively participating in the interventions. Their critical feedback was suggestive of an appreciation of the capacity of the three initiatives to be readily implemented with engagement from employers. They particularly emphasised the accessibility of the interventions for small-to-medium size organisations. In addition, the Beyond Education model and the three prototype interventions were also presented to various Career Services in Australia for their inspection and review (e.g., collegial meetings and conferences of the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) and to the academic community of business disciplines (e.g., Pensiero & McIlveen, 2006). The materials produced for the programme were distributed free of charge to Australian university Career Services upon request. This mandatory reporting process was also an important means by which to share our learning in the field with our colleagues in the sector and, as practitioners, to reflect critically upon our own experiences. Furthermore, as a direct result of the cooperation between the university's Career Service and the Faculty of Business industry networking functions have been successfully implemented. These functions bring small business representatives, academics, and students together with an explicit focus upon students' networking with potential employers, and vice versa. Other

trials are to be conducted in the future and they will focus on pre-graduation and utilising work experience as a recruitment technique.

Discussion

Broad generalisations from this case study are limited. Nevertheless, it was not the project's brief to create a nationally transferable set of interventions; rather it was to develop and test a limited set of prototype interventions in such a way that they could be used by other universities as a learning stimulus for the generation of ideas to meet the needs of their particular organisation and educational environment. We believe that the regional universities, in particular, may benefit the most from engaging in these types of services, as their students generally lack the choice and access to employment and employers enjoyed by their metropolitan counterparts. This is particularly relevant to regional universities that rely heavily upon small-to-medium size enterprises for the uptake of their graduates. Supporting those types of organisations to develop graduate employment programmes obviously has mutual benefits.

An important organisational learning outcome from this project is that cross-sector collaboration on the matter of graduate transition and employability is a valuable process. The project has demonstrated the value of university-industry collaboration through the employers' engagement in providing their knowledge and time for the employability skills workshops and through their support of the graduate induction initiative. For our own institution, this project has highlighted the value of the inter-departmental cooperation between the Career Service and Faculty of Business working together.

In conclusion, the notions of graduate employability and transition into the workforce are matters of importance for higher education institutions and industries which recruit graduate employees. The literature reviewed for this case study indicates that there are Australian universities' Career Services that are making a laudable contribution to the overall strategy of improving graduates' employability and transitions into the workforce, through the delivery of career development learning services to students. This project has contributed to the practice literature by demonstrating the potential of a set of interventions which may be readily adapted by university Career Services. The interventions may assist Career Services to work closer with rural and regional small-to-medium size employers, who have traditionally not played a major role in the mainstream graduate recruitment market, and whose needs have, concomitantly, not been specifically addressed by university Career Services.

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